



(LYRCD 6012)

A PIANO CHRISTMAS IN THE 1920s

Holiday reproducing piano roll performances of AMPICO star pianists.

THE AMPICO PIANO

The name AMPICO, an abbreviation that stood for “American Piano Company,” was one of the leading manufacturers of reproducing pianos in the early 20th century. Numerous musical luminaries, including composers Sergei Rachmaninoff and Fritz Kreisler, and legendary pianists Arthur Rubinstein and Artur Schnabel recorded for this musical wonder.

The first true reproducing piano using a perforated paper roll was patented by Emil Welte, in the United States in 1883. The early commercial interest in the “Welte Mignon” reproducing piano, in addition to the already by then long-standing popularity of standard player pianos lead several firms to take note. The AMPICO Company bought both the invention and hired the expertise of engineer Charles Fuller Stoddard. Stoddard had patented his own reproducing piano design in 1908, and when he joined AMPICO, the company began manufacturing full reproducing instruments, as well as an add-on reproducing roll playing mechanism capable of retrofitting some standard pianos.

It should first be noted that there is a fundamental difference between the player piano and the reproducing piano. While both utilize perforated paper rolls to convey the notes and tempo of the piece to be played, the reproducing piano's rolls also contain all of the expressive dynamics. This means that the roll plays the exact performance that was recorded onto it by the pianist, hence the name "reproducing." The perfection of such a piano that could exactly reproduce an existing (or idealized) performance on a paper roll was very soon the hi-end, technological/music device that any affluent music lover would want in his parlor.

By 1916, Stoddard's AMPICO had reached such a level of sophistication in design and manufacture, that the company dared hold a live recital at the Biltmore Hotel in New York City. During the concert, pianist Leopold Godowsky performed a series of pieces live, and then let the AMPICO perform the same works for comparison. The presentation proved both an extremely effective marketing tool and dramatic means of converting skeptics by allowing them to hear the reproducing piano's faithfulness to the original performance with their own ears. The company later repeated this concert at Carnegie Hall to a larger audience. Perhaps, even beyond the palpable and heady thrill of hearing an exact performance of the era's most lauded pianists live in one's own home, was the possibility that there existed a device in which the music and memories of bygone days could still be summoned forth to entertain and entrance on demand with the mere push of a lever, conjuring the happy spirits of times past, in the midst of an increasingly indifferent, electric and neon age of instant communication, stock tickers, automobiles and flying machines, that were, in just a few short years, rapidly erasing those earlier ages from existence.

For a time the AMPICO and its direct competitor, Aeolian's Duo-Art, vied to sign to their rosters the most well known pianists of the day specializing in every kind of music. Consequently, thousands of rolls in every possible genre were produced by both firms throughout the teens and twenties. Inevitably, the AMPICO Company went into receivership at the end of the decade, not only a victim of the Great Depression, but of radio's rapid inauguration as the preferred center of home entertainment. Even the thrill of having Rachmoninoff or Gershwin perform virtually live in one's home, could not compete with the vastly more economical "liveness" of radio's airwaves, providing a continuous stream of concerts, events, and instant information.

CHRISTMAS IN THE 1920s

The first national Christmas tree was electrically lighted in the year 1923 on the White House lawn by President Calvin Coolidge. It was also President Coolidge who coined the snappy phrase, "The business of America is business."

Several factors had a great influence on shaping the American celebration of Christmas in the twenties. One was the all but universal use of electricity and the electric light. Electric lights on Christmas trees had, by the 1920s, completely superseded the traditional the use of candles. Public lighted display advertising, holiday-themed store windows, illuminated billboards, as well as the new strings of cone shaped colored tree lights in the home, all contributed to giving the celebration of Christmas a new magical glow and excitement

that must have been profound in the century's first truly modern decade. Other general forces that certainly had a direct impact on the Christmas celebration and its gift-giving, was the increased income the booming economy of the twenties had on the average family's ability to afford gifts at Christmas time. Part and parcel with this, was the new recognition of marketing, advertising and consumer profiling as a quantifiable science. Yet, for all the glossy electric enhancements or ubiquitous commercialization of the holiday, perhaps the true measure of the Christmas experience from any earlier time, can be gleaned from the music shared during the holiday. The singing and playing of Carols is a tradition rooted in the Middle Ages, that extends right up to the present day. This communal tradition found its way into the American homes of the 19th and 20th century around the family piano – both standard and mechanical.

A wonderful aspect of the AMPICO holiday rolls released every year throughout the twenties, is that they made extensive use of the "Medley" format so as to include a great variety of seasonal music on each roll. Condensing works into medleys also provides a wide range of different emotions conveyed through music, from joyous exuberance to reflective reminiscence. The rolls were given quaint and charming titles like *Christmas by the Fireside*, *Grandmother's Christmas*, and even *A Christmas Eve Fantasy*. In listening to Lyrichord's *A Piano Christmas in the 1920s*, one not only encounters expected and much loved favorites, but also an unanticipated intermingling of romantic and sentimental pieces culled from the annals of popular songs and ballads. In *Grandmother's Christmas*, for example, one hears a sumptuously arranged holiday medley ranging from *Silent Night* and *Jingle Bells*, to rollicking, renditions of *Turkey in the Straw*, *Up in a Balloon Boys*, and *Bicycle Built for Two*. The contemporary listener will also encounter, perhaps for the first time, a number of Christmas songs now unfamiliar, but once staples of the Yuletide music menu, such as *A Christmas Message* and *Tomorrow will be Christmas* (Track 2), and *The Cherry Tree Carol* (Track 3), as well as the elegantly sentimental medley of six rarely heard songs found in *Christmas Greetings 1929* (Track 5), subtitled, *Twilight*, played by Adam Carroll.

Throughout the rolls on this recording, the listener will notice an underlying theme of *tempus fugit* or the flight of time. While the last song on the recording, *Auld Lang Syne*, is still used to usher out the old and welcome in the New Year, the holiday rolls are infused with a surprising number of songs like *Grandfather Clock*, *Silver Hairs among the Gold*, *Love's Old Sweet Song*, *Memories*, and *When You and I Were Young*, *Maggie*, suggesting that the holiday season fostered a special, almost painful awareness, of aging and mortality. This undercurrent is perhaps especially evident in the closing roll, *A Christmas Eve Fantasy* (Track 11), as a four handed overlay of "chimes," mark the significance of time's ceaseless passage on our collective experience of the annual holidays.

THOMAS VENTURELLA

As a very young child Thomas Venturella's first encounter with what he would later learn was called an "automatic musical instrument" happened at a county fair where he became mesmerized by the sight and sounds of a player piano with violin. A sound and

experience he never forgot.

When in high school an uncle purchased an old Wurlitzer upright player piano and a box of 50 rolls for \$50.00. Since this uncle lived across the street it made visits to this magical machine quite easy and they were made quite often. Many a summer night the sound of that old piano and the fabulous songs those old rolls provided could be heard up and down the streets of that otherwise quite neighborhood. After college and moving to Manhattan a piano became a priority. The first piano purchased was a gutted player and it subtly rekindled the fires of owning one. The second piano was another upright but it had the player mechanism in it this time. However, it was not working but the spool box in this piano said “AMPICO”. After some intensive research he discovered that the Ampico was actually a complex and sophisticated recording/player system by which the performances of the original artists were faithfully reproduced. Armed with this new information he decided to waste no more time with the second piano and set out on the quest for a real, bonafide reproducing piano.

The ownership of one of these magnificent machines became a reality with the purchase of a 1929 Haines Brothers 5’4” grand, containing a late *Ampico A* reproducing system.

THE HAINES BROS. AMPICO

In 1980 Mr. Venturella purchased the piano from a family in Conway, New Hampshire. They had gotten it from its original owner, a former neighbor of the New Hampshire couple. When new, the piano was purchased in Fitchburg, Massachusetts by a gentleman as a wedding gift for his bride-to-be. With the collapse of the stock market in 1929 and the subsequent Depression followed by World War II this piano saw little service. It spent many years closed up with rugs stacked on top. Fortunately it did not suffer the fate that so many reproducing pianos during the 40’s and 50’s did. These two decades were particularly hard on these pianos since the “player piano” had so fallen out of favor with the public. Piano technicians were repeatedly asked to “take out that stuff” from players when they were tuned, and as a result many pianos were gutted and great reproducing systems scrapped.

While the player mechanism in the Haines Bros. piano was no longer working, all the parts were there and that was the important issue. A little more homework and he found a master re-builder of the famous Ampico. This gentleman by the name of Fred Streicher of Brooklyn, NY, lovingly and faithfully rebuilt the reproducing system and when finished, it played as perfectly as if it had just come from the American Piano Company itself. Unfortunately Mr. Streicher is no longer with us, but his memory and exquisite craftsmanship live on.

THE TRACKS

With the exception of the roll played on Track 1 by an unknown

pianist, each of the other ten tracks were arranged and played, and in some cases composed, by known and outstanding artists of the early 20th century. Three of the rolls were arranged (Tracks 4, 5 and 7) by the very gifted and prolific Adam Carroll, dubbed the “AMPICO Kid” by his peers. Like many of his colleagues, he led a long and productive life, and during an interview that took place in 1965, made this confident statement:

“I find there is little doubt that, soon, the player and reproducing piano rolls will be very popular again.”

1. *HOLIDAY BY THE FIRESIDE 1928 (3:30)*

(Roll No. 7243-U)

This simple and atmospheric medley of three holiday songs was reproduced by the nimble fingers of an unknown pianist in 1928.

2. *CHRISTMAS CAROLS No. 1 (4:25)*

(Roll No. 463)

Played by Andrei Kmita (1870-1951)

According to expert David Wallis, Andrei Kmita was actually a favorite pseudonym of the versatile pianist and prolific AMPICO artist, Howard Brockway. The list of reproducing rolls he recorded, under both Brockway and Kmita, is impressively long and varied, matching in kind his devotion to the technology. In fact, a 1915 edition of *Musical America Magazine* declared that Brockway “...champions the contrivance against skeptics as passionately as though he had invented it himself...” This medley contains holiday songs once well known yet hardly heard in the present day.

A Christmas Message
A Sprig Arose to Glory
Tomorrow will be Christmas
Rejoice in your Redeemer’s Birth
Once in Royal David’s City
While Shepherd’s watched

3. *CHRISTMAS CAROLS No. 2 1928 (6:37)*

Played by Elsie Holt (1888-1974)

Created in 1928, this medley of Christmas favorites is played with great gusto by Elsie Holt. Elsie Holt, as pointed out in Elaine Obenchain’s classic work, *A Complete Catalog of AMPICO Reproducing Piano Roles*, (1977), is easily recognized as an anagrammatic pseudonym for well known composer and pianist, Leslie Loth. Loth, whose artistry is also featured in Track 11, *A Christmas Eve Fantasy 1928*, also recorded under his full name, Louis Leslie Loth.

Good King Wenceslas
What Child is This?

The Cherry Tree Carol
These Three Kings of Orient Are
Fum, Fum, Fum

4. *CHRISTMAS GREETING 1925 (5:30)*

(No roll number)

Arranged and played by Adam Carroll (1897-1974)

Adam Carroll, who also recorded under the names of Harry Shipman and Victor Lane, arranged and made rolls for AMPICO from 1922 until the late 1930s. In addition to recording nearly five hundred reproducing rolls, Carroll's long career included playing for silent films, Paul Whiteman's Orchestra, in Broadway Shows, along with Edgar Fairchild in two-handed performances, and as accompanist to famed dancer, Fred Astaire. Adam Carroll's arranging and playing skills are also featured on Tracks 5 and 7, *Christmas Greetings 1929* and *A Grandmother's Christmas* recorded in 1928.

Introduction

Oh, Little Town of Bethlehem

Silent Night

Oh Come All Ye Faithful

Unknown Song

The Second Minuet

Jingle Bells

Unknown Song

5. *CHRISTMAS GREETINGS 1929 (9:51)*

(Roll No. 7133)

Played by Adam Carroll (1897-1974)

Subtitled *Twilight*, this medley is comprised of songs not usually associated with Christmas, arranged and played by Adam Carroll.

Romance

Pearls

Love's Old Sweet Song

Serenatta

In the Gloaming

In the Starlight

6. PARADE OF THE WOODEN SOLDIERS (2:58)

(*La Chauve Souris*) (Roll No. 202891E)

Played by Herbert Clair (dates unknown) and Edgar Fairchild, (1898-1975)

Composed by Leon Jessel (1871-1942)

Written by Leon Jessel in 1905 (words by Ballard MacDonald, 1922).

Jessel was a German born musician well known for writing operettas. Since 1933, *The Parade of the Wooden Soldiers*, has been a highlight of the Christmas Spectacular at New

York City's *Radio City Music Hall*, and remains the signature precision dance number of the famed high-kicking Rockettes. This four-handed roll was played by Herbert Clair and Edgar Fairchild, consummate pianists, who also held key positions within the AMPICO Company. This roll is one of four they made together.

7. GRANDMOTHER'S CHRISTMAS 1927 (9:16)

(roll 6418)

Played by Adam Carroll (1897-1974)

This long and varied Christmas roll was played by Adam Carroll.

The Bells

Memories

Long, Long Ago

When you and I Were Young Maggie

Up in a Balloon Boys

Bicycle Built for Two

Sweet Genevieve

The Old Oaken Bucket

Turkey in the Straw

My Darling Clementine

In the Gloaming

Silver Threads Among the Gold

God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen

The Mistletoe Bough

Bemberge's "Il Neige"

Jesus Loves the Little Children

(also known as Tramp, Tramp, Tramp from WW I)

Grandfather's Clock

The Second Minuet

Love's Old Sweet Song

8. TOY SOLDIER'S MARCH (2:09)

(Roll No. 59921)

Played and composed by Fritz Kreisler (1875-1962)

This playful holiday piece was written by Austria-born composer and violinist, Fritz Kreisler. Written in 1917, the piece was actually played by Kreisler himself for this AMPICO reproducing roll.

As Elaine Obenchain points out in her book, "Kreisler was also an extraordinarily fine pianist, although few people knew it since he never played in public. Thus his AMPICO recordings provide the unique opportunity of hearing Kreisler the pianist."

9. THE FIRST NOEL (3:15)

(Roll No. 63861)

Played by John Tasker Howard. (1890-1964)

This traditional English Christmas carol dating back, perhaps as far as the 13th century, is played by John Tasker Howard, and is one of only four rolls that he made for the AMPICO Company. Howard went on to become a well known music writer and was editor of *Musician*, *McCalls* and *Cue* Magazines. Howard also served as Curator of the American Music Collection of the New York Public Library from 1940 to 1956.

10. GESU BAMBINO (4:55)

(Roll No. 62683)

Composed and played by Pietro Yon (1886-1943)

Italian born Pietro Yon, who immigrated to the United States in 1907, was a composer, concert performer, and musical director/organist of St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. Yon's best-known work is this Italian Christmas Carol, *Gesu Bambino (Infant Jesus)*, written in 1917, replete with Italian lyrics, later translated into English by Frederick H. Martini. Pietro Yon's skill as a keyboard artist can clearly be heard in this moving rendition of his own Christmas composition.

11. A CHRISTMAS EVE FANTASY 1928

(Roll No. 6800)

Played by L. Leslie Loth (1888-1974).

A Christmas Eve Fantasy was arranged and played by Louis Leslie Loth, the artist heard earlier on *Christmas Carols No. 2* (Track 3), under the anagrammatic pseudonym of Elsie Holt. Loth settled in New York City in 1918, and spent the remainder of his career as a teacher and composer of no less than 500 pieces of music. This concluding four-handed roll is as delightful as it is haunting.

Silent Night

Be Gone Dull Care

O' Sanctissima

Once in Royal David's City

The Nutcracker and the Mouse King

Boccherini's Minuet

Over the Chimes

The Bells of St. Mary's

Gounod's "Sanctus"

Auld Lang Syne

CREDITS

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24 bit mastering

Research and notes by Lesley Doyel,

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Elaine Obenchain's The Complete Catalog of AMPICO REPRODUCING PIANO ROLLS, 1977, William H. Edger ton Pub., Rochester, NY

A Catalog of Music for the AMPICO Copyright 1925, the AMPICO Corp., NYC

The Piano: The Complete Illustrated Guide to the World's Most Popular Musical Instrument
By Jeremy Siepmann
Published 1999, Hal Leonard Corporation, Milwaukee, WI

Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920's
Frederick Lewis Allen
1931, Harper & Row Publishers, NYC

INTERNET SITES

The Player Piano Ring
http://www.player-care.com/the_ring.html

The Pianola Institute
<http://www.pianola.org>

Pianola.co.nz
Preserving the music of yesterday
<http://www.pianola.co.nz/index.asp>

Music For Pianos
<http://musicforpianos.com>

AMICA - The Automatic Musical Instrument Collectors' Association
<http://www.amica.org>

Player Piano Group
The national society for the pianola & related instruments

<http://www.pianolasociety.com>

The Mechanical Music Digest (MMD)

<http://www.mmdigest.com>

DEDICATION

Dedicated to Theresa W. Fritsch (1922-2008) who, along with her husband, Peter H. Fritsch (1918-2004), founded Lyrichord Discs in 1950. Theresa remained a staunch supporter of Lyrichord, and always loved a good piano.



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